

~~sion and that of your readers, but only if you clarify what you see in it. To make use of comparison you must first make something of it.~~

## Engaging Counterarguments

As you write out your draft, writing in counterarguments to your own case may seem, at best, an unwelcome obligation and, at worst, a perverse way of sabotaging your own efforts.

It's not hard to understand why. In defending a thesis, you usually find complicating questions, opposing viewpoints, and rival hypotheses lying in ambush. Counterarguments can assault what you thought was a secure position or can distract you as you try to develop what may already be an uncertain and tenuous point. Not wanting to add to your difficulties, you may prefer to avoid counterargument altogether. Why draw attention to problems readers ought to discover for themselves? Why weaken a case about which you already feel insecure?

You won't be able to dispel these hesitations and misgivings by sprinkling your prose with an occasional "Granted" or "To be sure." A perceptive reader will recognize token, halfhearted references to another viewpoint as counterfeit counterargument. Furtive glances at unanswered questions will not build your credibility, nor will they bolster your confidence. Moreover, if you are unwilling to look troublesome issues in the eye, you won't be able to strengthen your case as you refine your draft.

Instead of being coy about counterarguments, try being forthright and fair-minded. The strategy will amaze your severest critics and convert fence sitters to your cause. To help you with this approach, let's consider why, where, and how to address counterarguments in a manner that turns obligation into creative opportunity.

### Why Should You Address Counterarguments? \_\_\_\_\_

When writing analysis and argument, you should expect that your views and those of your readers may differ. In fact, you ought to be worried if they don't. An analysis or argument that doesn't engage a question genuinely at issue probably isn't worth writing. When you analyze, your counterarguments will take the form of questions and perhaps rival hypotheses. When you argue, the counterarguments will likely become more pointed and challenge more directly your point of view or the adequacy of your evidence. In both cases, counterarguments are more than a matter of polite deference to your audience; they are risks inherent to analysis and argument. You can't disregard your reader's capacity to disagree,

because that very capacity also provides for the possibility of assent. By ignoring counterarguments, you alienate your audience and weaken the very basis for agreement.

If analysis and especially argument oblige you to treat counterarguments, that's no reason not to take creative advantage of them. Although you may think of counterarguments as a defensive measure, a way to forestall problems, they can also carry positive persuasive force. When my students tackle controversial issues, they are regularly amazed that an honest, respectful treatment of opposing views can help their case. When you acknowledge that opinions other than your own deserve a hearing, your own opinions generally find a more willing audience. Likewise, by engaging counterarguments seriously, you show yourself to be reasonable, fair-minded, and well informed. Most of us turn a deaf ear to the one-dimensional dogmatist or the insistent fanatic, and we shouldn't be surprised that readers do likewise. If you write as if those who disagree with you merit little consideration, you are only inviting the same treatment. You can turn counterarguments to your favor by exploring them fully and dealing with them fairly.

Counterarguments can serve as positive persuasive tools if you are confident that your case has merit. But what should you do when counterarguments readily dismantle whatever case you're trying to build? Consider these counterarguments as tools for discovering and refining a case that merits your confident support. As you write out a draft, it's imperative that you write in and explore points that call what you say into question. If you don't, you deprive yourself of an essential learning tool. A dogmatic, one-dimensional case in a final draft usually reflects an unwillingness to explore early on. The sooner you raise counterarguments, the more likely you can revise your way out of simpleminded assertions. As you explore questions that seem inconvenient to the case you are building, you may even find some of your most persuasive support. Your own assertions gain credibility, after all, if you can answer probing questions regarding them. Once you look on counterarguments as ways to test the limits of your case and even to find good reasons for it, you'll pursue them as doggedly as your severest critic. And your own case will be stronger for your effort.

When you confront counterarguments, you force yourself to *think*. You're challenging—and enhancing—your own reasoning by asking, “Is my opinion or hypothesis *really* the best way of accounting for all the evidence? Why exactly is my opinion better than other opinions that could also be argued with some force?” When you confront counterarguments in your paper, you have to answer these questions. When you do so, you are engaged in serious thinking, thinking that is both rigorous and creative.

### Where Might You Address Counterarguments? \_\_\_\_\_

You should alert readers to counterarguments early in your essay, preferably in the introduction. By mentioning counterarguments at the outset, you can clarify the issue that occasions your essay. Moreover, you can forestall questions that your reader may wish to pose by indicating that you will take up points of controversy in the body of your paper. If readers sense that you are aware of concerns that complicate your case, they will be more willing to grant you a hearing and not beset you with immediate queries.

As you set up dynamic relationships among occasion, thesis, and reasons in your introduction, you will find three ready opportunities to address counterarguments.

- A counterargument can serve as your occasion, especially if the counterargument presents a view to which you respond in your essay.
- You can also introduce a counterargument in conjunction with your thesis; such a counterthesis suggests you are aware of rival hypotheses and conclusions.
- The reasons that project the organization of your essay also allow you to engage counterarguments, especially if the questions readers are likely to pose concern specific aspects of your evidence.

By introducing counterarguments at the outset of your paper, you are signaling your intent to deal with them in the body of your discussion. You have three basic ways to make good on your promise as you develop your full draft.

**You can address counterarguments all at once before you move on to your own case** This strategy works well if you believe that your reader needs to have a set of questions answered immediately or if you must set aside a series of reservations before you move on to your own point. In setting up her argument that life imprisonment should replace the death penalty, this student saw the need to address reasons for capital punishment straightaway. This first paragraph promises she will do so early in the essay.

Today on the death rows of 37 state prisons, 1,788 offenders await the courts' decisions on their death sentence appeals. If, instead of the courts, present public opinion decided the fate of these criminals, they would surely die, since 75 to 84 percent of the population supports capital punishment. Although the reasons for supporting the death penalty vary, the two most commonly cited are that it is the only fitting punishment for some crimes, and that it deters other people from committing the same crimes.

I am not convinced by these arguments. The one is based on a simplistic view of the penal system, the other on statistical misinformation. Because there is not acceptable justification for capital punishment, I believe that it should be abolished in the United States. Life imprisonment, rightly conceived, would be a more fitting punishment, a more effective deterrent, and a lesser drain on the public purse.

**You can engage counterarguments as you present the reasoning behind each of your proofs** When counterarguments relate to your own specific evidence, you are best served by engaging opposing views and contrary evidence as you advance your own proofs. When writing to expose the hazards of shipping radioactive waste to the proposed Waste Isolation Pilot Plant in New Mexico, one student found that counterarguments lay in the details. Here's how she set up one of several proofs for her argument, this one pertaining to the safety of the roads on which the nuclear waste would travel.

When New Mexico originally agreed to host WIPP, the Department of Energy indicated that it would secure federal funds for the road improvements and bypasses necessary to transport the waste safely. The federal government now states, however, that the funds are unnecessary at the present time because New Mexico's interstate highways have recently been upgraded with federal money. Although portions of the interstate have been improved, highway conditions remain a central concern. The waste-disposal route takes trucks through downtown Albuquerque on I-25, where heavy congestion persists despite nominal improvements. Moreover, the secondary roads that could be used to avoid congested areas remain in poor condition, as they have not been upgraded in recent years.

In succeeding paragraphs she then elaborated on each aspect of her rebuttal to the counterargument that roads are now adequate. By addressing counterarguments early in each paragraph or section of your paper, you can anticipate questions before your reader poses them. Moreover, early mention of those questions allows you plenty of opportunity to respond.

**You can organize your paper as a refutation** Some argumentative essays reply to the reasons given in support of another position. The approach is useful if you are responding to an already articulated position; reasons for that position then become counterarguments to your own view. By answering arguments already set forth, you may be able to show that the other case is unreasonable or a proposal unworkable, as illustrated in the following example.

Tipper Gore, spokeswoman for the organization Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC), contends that a great many song lyrics, such as "My true love is Satan, riding in a phaeton," are harmful to children. The PMRC wants to protect children from lyrics that glorify violence, obscenity, drug use, and satanism by having the music industry place warning labels on records, print song lyrics on albums, and renegotiate contracts with "offensive" performers. The PMRC's plan, however, is unworkable. First of all, it would be impossible for a group of people to come to an agreement about the proper label for 25,000 songs a year. Second, the record industry could not print the lyrics on all album covers because they don't own the rights to most of the lyrics. Third, children cannot be protected from offensive on-stage performances because the record industry has no control over the performers.

### How Should You Handle Counterarguments? \_\_\_\_\_

Most papers treat counterarguments inadequately not because they don't mention the other side at all or do so at an inappropriate time; they come up short because they don't engage counterarguments seriously. Afraid that they may undermine their own case, students often accord questions, contrary evidence, and opposing views the briefest of mention. Merely pointing to counterargument becomes a way of keeping confusion at bay. Satisfied that they have done their duty in what is often no more than a phrase, they then pick up where they left off, as if nothing had been said. And if the truth be known, not much has been said. When you fail to take a counterargument seriously by considering its merit, probing its implications, and answering its concerns, your gesture—dismissive at heart—is more likely to enrage than mollify the skeptical reader.

A cavalier attitude carries a further cost: your readers may not understand exactly how those counterarguments figure in your discussion. Mentioning counterarguments makes little sense unless readers know how you respond. You must therefore integrate the concerns you acknowledge into your own line of reasoning. The task calls for subtle discernment, for questions at issue necessarily vary and the psychological disposition of your audience can be rather fickle. Stock replies are inherently unpersuasive. Nevertheless, you may wish to keep in mind three general strategies for engaging counterargument.

**Strategic concession** Because few arguments reduce themselves to black and white, be ready to acknowledge the merit in other views. Spirited debate in Congress about the wisdom of launching military action in what became the Persian

Gulf War pitted intelligent, well-meaning people on either side of the issue. Many were surely tempted to characterize proponents as militaristic yahoos or opponents as wimps unwilling to support their nation's interests—but at the price of losing respect and goodwill. Inexperienced writers often undervalue the persuasive effect of concession: by acknowledging competing views and contrary evidence you own up to legitimate disagreement. In doing so, you present yourself as fair-minded, as someone willing to earn conclusions responsibly. Moreover, strategic concession can help you set up your own strong arguments to follow. Should you find yourself conceding too much, however, you may wish to reconsider the position for which you are arguing.

**Refutation** If you can meet and refute the challenges posed to your case, so much the better. Be careful, however, not to gloat over victories concerning minor objections, while you leave major reservations unaddressed. For example, in a paper lauding court rulings that give police more latitude in searching automobiles for suspected drugs, it makes little sense for the author to discuss at length matters of convenience and inconvenience, while leaving aside the far more central objection of search and seizure without a warrant. You are best off tackling the strongest counterarguments, or readers may believe that you are missing key points.

**Irrelevance to the matter at hand** If you frame the issue carefully and qualify your own thesis appropriately, you can demonstrate that some counterarguments may not be germane to the discussion. For example, instead of arguing that all gun owners should be required to take a class in gun safety, you could focus on a more narrow assertion: that such a class would reduce the likelihood of accidental death or injury. By carefully establishing the grounds of debate, you can treat some apparent objections as out of bounds. Troublesome questions central to requiring the class (such as cost or enforcement) are no longer germane to the revised assertion on which the broader thesis nevertheless rests—the likely effect of such a course on firearm accidents.

As helpful as these three strategies may be, you cannot handle counterarguments unless you first see them as tools for refining your own thinking. Engage counterarguments not merely to acknowledge or refute them, or to dispense with them as irrelevant, but to *learn* from them. If you approach each question or objection as an opportunity rather than an obligation, you will develop subtle, colorful shades to your thinking and your prose. Reasoned nuance persuades far more readily than the simplistic black-and-white contrasts to which most arguments are reduced. Questions and objections ought to find a place in your analysis and argument as you write out your final draft. But long before that, be sure you write them in as tools for discovery.

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# Ideas in Action

A Guide to Critical  
Thinking and Writing

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